

**THE TEXT**

<sup>1</sup>Jesus told his disciples: “There was a rich man whose manager was accused of wasting his possessions. <sup>2</sup>So he called him in and asked him, ‘What is this I hear about you? Give an account of your management, because you cannot be manager any longer.’

<sup>3</sup>The manager said to himself, ‘What shall I do now? My master is taking away my job. I’m not strong enough to dig, and I’m ashamed to beg—<sup>4</sup>I know what I’ll do, so that when I lose my job here, people will welcome me into their houses.’ <sup>5</sup>So he called in each one of his master’s debtors. He asked the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’

<sup>6</sup>‘Nine hundred gallons of olive oil,’ he replied.

The manager told him, ‘Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it four hundred and fifty.’

<sup>7</sup>Then he asked the second, ‘And how much do you owe?’

‘A thousand bushels of wheat,’ he replied.

‘He told him, ‘Take your bill and make it eight hundred.’

<sup>8</sup>The master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly. For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light. <sup>9</sup>I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings. <sup>10</sup>Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much. <sup>11</sup>So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches? <sup>12</sup>And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else’s property, who will give you property of your own? <sup>13</sup>No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.”

**SERMON**

You might remember from last week’s Gospel reading that Jesus taught some parables. Parables are stories that use every day earthly realities that would be familiar with the audience, to teach about unseen, spiritual realities—what the Kingdom of God is like.

Jesus used the imagery of a shepherd searching for a lost sheep, and a woman searching for a lost coin, to show us what God is like—he is a God who searches for that which is lost. They are stories about God searching for people, who, because of sin, are lost and far away from him. Jesus told these parables primarily to the Pharisees, who resented that he welcomed sinners and had fellowship with them. Like the shepherd and woman in the parables, God searches for that which is lost until he finds them, because they are valuable to him and belong to him.

Jesus had told these parables to teach the Pharisees that one’s standing before God is dependent solely on God’s grace and mercy. The disciples were also once separated from God and lost, before they were found by Jesus and he called them to follow him in his mission to seek and save the lost. With today’s parable, Jesus teaches his disciples that they need to rely on God’s grace and mercy for their ministry.

So the story goes: there was once a rich man whose manager was accused of wasting his possessions. The rich man calls him in and demands an account. “What’s this I hear?” he asks. The wasteful manager is fired and the ‘under new management’ sign is about to go up! He knows that no other employer is going to want to give him a chance because of his dishonesty. He contemplates how he might be able to find work. Manual labour like digging fields is no good because he hasn’t got the strength for that. He thinks about begging, but he’s too proud for that.

He knows he needs to come up with a plan to make friends fast so that he’ll have people to welcome him into their homes and help him in his time of need. There’s only one thing for it—a customer rewards program of epic proportions! He calls in each one of his master’s debtors and goes to work slashing their bills.

Now just imagine if you were the master in this story, and your manager had wasted your wealth like this. And then to make matters worse, he slashes the debts of your customers by huge amounts, ripping you off badly, *twice over!* Wouldn't you be furious? Well, the manager is going to lose his job. But we might expect something else to happen to him too. We might expect that the owner would have him charged and thrown into prison for fraud and theft, or get revenge by publicly shaming him and really ruining the reputation of this guy, or even belt him one! We would probably expect something like that would come next in Jesus' story...because that might be what we would feel like doing to someone who had wronged *us* so badly.

It's astonishing, then, that this rich master does the opposite of what we would expect—the master *commends him!*

This is the punchline of Jesus' story, and so then, the take away from it. So it poses a problem. If this is a parable to teach people about what God is like, is God *really like this*, dishonest?!? Is he commending dishonesty to his disciples?

The answer is: not at all! The apparent dilemma comes when we focus on the dodgy manager. But when we focus on the master then it puts everything in a completely different perspective. The focus of the parable is not on the dishonesty of the manager, but on the mercy of the master—which is the manager's focus too. The manager realises that there is nothing he can do to get himself out of this mess. He knows the solution lies outside of himself. So he hatches an ingenious plot of slashing the amounts of his master's debtors to make friends for himself, so that people will welcome him into their houses after he finishes his job.

This plan assumes that the master is a merciful and honourable lord. The plan could only work if this was consistent with the master's own nature, and if the community had come to see such mercy from him in the past. The manager must act quickly so that his master's debtors will think that the adjustments in the accounts stem from the master's mercy and not the manager's desperation. So he called in each one of his master's customers, and goes to work at cutting their debts. The readiness of the debtors to accept the dodgy manager's rewriting of their bills shows that they believe this is an initiative of the master. If he wasn't a merciful man this would all seem too good to be true; too far away from his observable character, and would be spotted as an obvious ploy by the manager.

But they do not think it to be a ploy by the manager, because the master's reputation is known to be one of mercy and kindness. This is seen in his own treatment of the steward—yes, the steward loses his job—but his master does not punish him or have him arrested for theft or defunding of his business, even though he would have been in his rights to do so. Even though the manager didn't deserve it, he pinned all his hope on the master's merciful character, so that at the end of his time in managing his master's wealth he had a home to go to.

In the same way, the disciples are also to recognise they have no resources within themselves in their calling to follow Jesus in seeking and saving the lost, and place their complete trust in their merciful Master. They are to trust in him for everything, and not place their trust in money, which represents all worldly resources—human strength and possessions, ingenuity and desires. Instead of looking to these things as a secure foundation for certainty in an uncertain world, they are to trust in their merciful heavenly Master to provide all that they need for their life and ministry. Unlike the dodgy manager, they are to use what they have first received from God wisely as faithful managers of the gospel for the sake of his kingdom, so that at the end of their time in managing their heavenly master's wealth, they have a home in heaven to go to.

This parable is for us today, too. Like the wasteful manager banked all his hope on his master being merciful, in the same way our only hope is to bank everything on our Heavenly master's merciful nature. We, too, are to trust in Jesus alone, letting go of whatever we hang on to for security and purpose, comfort and peace. Today's parable is consistent with Jesus' wider teaching throughout

Luke's Gospel. He taught the disciples to pray: "Give us each day our daily bread." We will be given enough for each day, and are to rely on our Heavenly Father's provision for each day, rather than our own ingenuity in accruing a lifetime of wealth on earth. For wealth and possessions possess and master a person, and we cannot serve two masters.

We, his church of today, are to trust in Jesus alone as we follow him out into the world, to those who seek salvation from their anxiety, fear, boredom, and problems, with money, possessions and lifestyle. We are to share with them true salvation through his good news.

That good news is that our Father in heaven is the merciful master, for Jesus' sake. It was when we had an unpayable debt that God the Father sent his own Son, who, though he was rich, became poor for our sakes. For like the wasteful and dishonest manager we too are guilty of wrongdoing and have no possibility of pleading innocence when we are called to account. But just as the dishonest manager didn't get the punishment he was due, neither does God treat us according to how our sins deserve.

Like the dishonest manager, our only hope is in our merciful master in heaven, who did not just rewrite our account and reduce it by 20% or even 50%, but erased it completely, by sending his holy and innocent Son Jesus, to pay our unpayable debt of sin, when he took our place on the Cross. Then he credited innumerable riches into your account by giving you his own righteousness. That is where God showed his undivided loyalty for all people, and his undivided loyalty to you.

That is how the Kingdom of God went to work in the world, and through the crucified, risen Christ who brings blessing through his word and sacraments, the Kingdom of God is still at work in the world, mercifully and graciously reconciling relationships. Jesus came to show us that the Kingdom of God has little to do with fairness, keeping strictly accurate ledgers, or making sure that everyone is treated according to what they deserve. Instead, he has searched for and found us, even calling us to be his instruments of peace to one another, and those around us, forgiving our debts, as we forgive those who are debtors to us.

One day our houses, property, possessions, money, church buildings, and even the face of the earth will be no more. So always pin all your hopes on your Heavenly Master's merciful help, that when the wealth and things of this world finally end, you will be received into your heavenly home and be commended with the words of your merciful master; the Father in heaven: "Well done good and faithful servant!" Amen.